Soldiers Online

near Simmesport, La.

Bridge Build

Story and Photos by
Patricia Warrick

THE 814th Engineer Company from Fort Polk, La., called for assistance from the 7th Aviation Regiment at Fort Campbell, Ky., to complete a river-crossing exercise this past spring. The aviation unit's CH-47 Chinooks airlifted the engineers' bridge-erector boats and six-ton bridge bays into the Mississippi River near Simmesport, La.

Engineers can move over land and launch boats and bridge sections from transporter vehicles, which is what the 814th usually does during training, but sometimes there are miles of congested roads between the engineers and the bridge site, said company commander CPT Sean Jones. That's when helicopters come in handy — and training with the 7th Avn. Regt. gave the engineers valuable experience in performing an air-supported mission, he said.

Patricia Warrick is editor of the Fort Polk Guardian.

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Engineers in bridge-erection boats push the bays together against the current as others join the sections into a raft.

A Chinook helicopter from the 7th Aviation Regiment at Fort Campbell, Ky., whips up a rainbow of spray as it lowers an assault float bridge bay into the Mississippi River during a river-crossing exercise near Simmesport, La. Meanwhile, soldiers of the 814th Engineer Company come out to retrieve the bay in bridge-erection boats.

Bridge Builders

(Above) **Having latched six bays together to make a raft, the engineers lower the end section's ramp to provide access to the shore.**

The assault float bridge that the engineers use is also called a "ribbon" bridge, because it flexes and ripples under the weight of traffic.

"It undulates, like a long suspension bridge," said Jones. "You feel waves under you."

The 814th is capable of bridging a 200-meter-wide body of water with its 42 bridge bays, and ideally this is what the unit would do, said MAJ Douglas Wahlert, executive officer of the 814th's parent unit, the 46th Engr. Battalion. However, the Mississippi River near Simmesport is 1,000 meters wide, so the engineers built rafts instead.

After each bay was released from its Chinook carrier, engineers used bridge-erection boats to retrieve the sections and push them into place.

Each raft can hold a tank, two Bradley fighting vehicles or eight Humvees.

The bays enter the water folded up and looking somewhat like huge loaves of bread. From a safe distance, an engineer pulls a lanyard to release the travel latch, and the bay opens into a floating roadbed.

Six interior sections and two end or "ramp" bays are pushed and latched together to make a raft, which the boats ferry across the river. Each raft can hold a tank, two Bradley fighting vehicles or eight Humvees.

Assault float bridging is fairly hazardous work. Hands can get smashed between pitching bays, and falling overboard is always a consideration. While "drownproof" training and lifejackets provide a safety margin, cold water, swift currents, floating debris or runaway bridge bays can add to the hazards.

For that reason, one of the bridge-erection boats is always set up as a "safety boat," its crew's primary purpose to rescue personnel from the water and provide first aid, said Jones.

In wartime, the engineers would have the added hazards of facing enemy fire. To compensate, they would raft at night, without lights or under the protection of smoke generators — which of course add new problems due to limited visibility.

During the exercise the 814th participated in four day operations and one night mission.

"After the aviators left, we continued to train using our trucks," said Jones. "The company proved its versatility using both techniques."

All 125 company members took part in the exercise, Jones said. "Maintenance workers repaired boats, welders patched holes in the bays, fuelers worked with the helicopters and the cooks kept us fed. Everybody did a great job." □

SPC Keith Ewan *(from left)*, SGT David Benter and PVT Jeanna Johnson use the flat-fronted bridge-erection boat to hold the raft in place.